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AUTHOR Banks, Ellen C.
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ABSTRACT

In Malaysia, the national moral education curriculums are designed to develop the values that Malaysians of diverse cultures share or that the government wishes to develop as shared values to bring about religious and ethnic harmony. Moral education for Muslims is incorporated into in-school religious education, while a separate, essentially secular moral education curriculum has been prepared for non-Muslim children. The moral education curriculum is designed around ten values: physical and mental cleanliness, consideration, moderation, diligence, thankfulness, trustworthiness, fairness, affection, respect, and society. As set out by the education ministry, the curriculum leaves no room for discarding, deleting, or modifying these values. Instructional materials focus on developing students; ability to apply moral principles in decision making and role taking. Many lessons focus on neighborliness, interracial harmony, and the avoidance of conceit and boasting. While the curriculum does not openly advocate different rules or responsibilities for boys and girls, boys are more often the main characters in the stories. While the curriculum is designed for non-Malays only, some of the textbooks are written and illustrated by Malays and show people from various ethnic groups, including Malays. The moral education curriculum is experimental, and many contextual factors will determine its influence on children's moral development. Sample stories at five grade levels are included. (AC)

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MORAL EDUCATION IN A MULTICULTURAL CONTEXT: THE MALAYSIAN PRIMARY CURRICULUM

Ellen C. Banks

Daemen College Amherst, New York

Society for Research in Child Development Meetings

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Having explored the cognitive process of moral development for many years, developmental psychologists are beginning to study the social and cultural contexts of moral education. (Damon, 1980; LeVine & White, 1986.) This paper describes some aspects of a national moral education curriculum, and explores some of the implicit assumptions about cultural contexts and moral development that underlie this curriculum.

Malaysia is one of the Southeast Asian nations that is rapidly developing a modern, high technology economy. One legacy of immigration during Malaysia's colonial past is a highly varied and sometimes volatile mixture of ethnicities and religious groupings. The Malays, who form just over half the population, have constitutional guarantees of political dominance, and have been gaining in economic power, which was previously concentrated in colonial British hands, and then in the Malaysian Chinese population. The Malay language, Bahasa Malaysia, is the official national language, and Islam, the official religion of the Malays, has special status under law. However, religious freedom is guaranteed to the Chinese, Indian and indigenous minority populations, and many languages are used in everyday life and commerce.

The national moral education curriculum is designed to develop the values that are believed to be shared by Malaysians of diverse cultures, or those the government wishes to develop as shared values. Moral education for Muslims is incorporated into religious education within the schools, while a separate, essentially secular moral education curriculum has been prepared for non-Muslim children. Government-sponsored schooling is otherwise fully integrated.

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Moral education as a school subject is a rather recent innovation in Malaysia. During the 1980's the entire primary school curriculum was revised, resulting in the Kurikulum Baru (New Curriculum.) Moral education was added to this curriculum following extensive discussion within the education community and among the general public about the need for developing positive, shared national values and social responsibility. Social changes resulting from urbanization, economic change, and increases in crime and drug use were among issues that, to many Malaysians, needed to be addressed in schools. Thus moral education was designed to fill a need for non-Muslim students that was assumed to be provided already for Muslim students in religion classes. To simplify a complex issue, it would be incompatible with Islamic teachings to have a moral education class outside of religious classes, since Islamic values address all areas of life.

The Moral Education curriculum is designed around ten Values: Cleanliness in Physical and Mental Aspects, Consideration, Moderation, Diligence, Thankfulness, Trustworthiness, Fairness, Affection, Respect and Society. Textbooks at each level include stories illustrating these values, some written in the form of scenes for the children to act out in class, followed by comprehension exercises and suggested activities meant to engage the children in solving problems or finding other examples of the principles illustrated. The curriculum also contributes to language education, since the medium of instruction, Bahasa Malaysia, is not the native language of the non-Malay ethnic groups who study the moral development curriculum (see Banks, 1993, for a discussion of language policy in education.)

The Malaysian curriculum differs in several ways from approaches to moral education in the United States such as Values Clarification (Casteel & Stahl, 1975) and Kohlberg's Just Community (Kohlberg,1985), both of which try to encourage moral reasoning but do not try to steer moral choices in any particular direction. Malaysia has a national curriculum determined by the education ministry. There is no room for discarding, deleting or modifying the values that are selected for inclusion into the curriculum. Although Malaysian society is very diverse, the government assumes that these values are either shared already among adults of different

ethnic and religious groups, or that the selected values need to be shared to bring about harmony and a good social and physical environment. Values taught by parents in all Malaysian ethnic groups include personal cleanliness, respect for elders and helpfulness at home. Furthermore, it is assumed that all Malaysians believe in God and belong to some religion. Values that are more prevalent in some Malaysian cultures than in others include kindness to animals, environmental beautification, and neighborly friendship. Racial harmony is a value that is probably thought to need development in all groups.

A centrally controlled educational system in a nation that officially recognizes religion, is very different from the diversified, secular American society. It is often suggested that moral education could not be taught as a subject in American schools because it would be impossible to agree on which values to teach. However, as Damon (1980) suggests, Americans may exaggerate their diversity of values when they express reservations about moral education in schools: "Whether or not we take a universalist stand on morality, it is evident that many of our society's most fundamental values are widely enough shared for unhesitating intergenerational transmission...all of us want our children to endorse justice, legitimate authority, the needs of others, and their own responsibilities as citizens in a democratic society. (p.150)"

The Malaysian curriculum has specific goals, but is not simply indoctrination. Many of the lessons present stories where some sort of decision making is called for. They are not "moral dilemmas" in the sense of conflicts between two moral principles, but rather everyday situations that call for applications of moral principles. Examples:

(Second year book, written as a playlet for children to act out in class) Six boys are painting with watercolors in school. Halim spills the water glass for rinsing brushes, and ruins Awang's picture. The two boys quarrel-"I didn't mean to! " 'But you're supposed to be careful!" Beng Teong tells them not to quarrel. Then Awang spills a box of pencil shavings that mix with the spilled water to make a big mess. There's another go-around about intention

and due caution. The two boys agree to clean up, but Beng Teong, the peacemaker, says all six should cooperate to clean up their classroom.

Mary (fifth year) shows a new book to two friends who are eager to borrow it. She says she'll lend it after she's finished reading it. Later she finds it is missing from her bookbag. She angrily tells Salimah that Anisah , who was the more eager to read the book, must have taken it, and that she won't be friends with someone she can't trust. On their way home, the bus driver asks, "Did anyone leave this book on the bus? " Mary apologizes to Anisah, who forgives her, while Salimah cautions Mary about blaming people.

(Third year): Jaswant, school janitor, finds a purse with money. She thinks about keeping it to buy food and medicine for her father, but remembers her mother's teachings and takes the money to the principal's office. A little girl had been crying there because she lost the money for her school fees and books. The principal praises Jaswant and tells the students at daily assembly to follow her good example.

In the exercises following these stories, children are asked to think of examples of comparable situations. Thus, moral reasoning is encouraged in a context of adult guidance, a climate Damon calls "respectful engagement." This is the plan; only classroom observations and interviews could tell how children experience it.

Another developmental aspect of the curriculum is its implicit recognition of development in roletaking from the first year (age seven) to the fifth (age twelve). For example, early lessons on the value of cleanliness begin with the immediate home environment and with washing, brushing teeth, and clean clothes, while later cleanliness lessons try to link physical cleanliness with "mental cleanliness". At the fourth year, a girl is shown getting ready for school, a topic also covered in earlier years, but then the discussion extends to being tidy at breakfast so other will be pleased to see us, and guarding our senses by using our eyes and ears to see and hear pleasant things, while avoiding gossip, ugliy deeds and bad words. Household cleanliness is taught at the earliest levels by showing models of children helping at home, while the fourth year introduces a pair of grandparents who childproof their house to

protect their grandchildren, and clean up a junk heap in the backyard to prevent snakes from finding a hiding place. By the fifth year, about half the stories do not involve children, but are about larger social issues. For example, a fifth year story about a village that starts its own lending library, shows how people can contribute in different ways according to their resources—money, volunteer time, education—and suggests that one individual with a good idea can inspire others to help.

While the curriculum is designed for non-Malays only, some of the textbooks are written and illustrated by Malays, (others do not identify the authors), and the illustrations show people identifiable as being from varied ethnic groups, including a large share of Malays. It will be interesting to see if this creative approach to moral education is eventually incorporated into the Islamic religion curriculu , which is far less diversified in the range of moral issues addressed, concentrating mainly on good manners and respect, along with lessons in prayer rituals and Islamic history.

Many of the moral education lessons in the secular curriculum focus on neighborliness and interracial harmony. One story at the fourth year level features a Malay family who help their new neighbors, a young Chinese couple, with moving their possessions, and then invite them to tea. Malaysians, particularly in the cities, often have friendships through work and school contacts with people of different races, and there is a long standing custom of welcoming acquaintances of other religions to one's home on the vast array of religious festivals. However, friendship and cooperation within neighborhoods is not particularly common, except in rural Malay villages. Urban neighborhoods are ethnically integrated, but are not usually the base for social activities; for Chinese Malaysians, the extended family is the main focus of social activities. The curriculum is clearly trying to extend the value of neighborly friendship throughout the society. An issue that may seen unusual in a moral education curriculum is gardening. While even the poorest Malay villages feature flowers and colorful bushes around every house, urban Malaysians of other groups are not universally committed to landscaping; the curriculum teaches that school and home grounds

should be beautified and cared for. From a non-Malay Malaysian perspective, these lessons might appear to promote assimilation to Malay values as national values.

Another value found throughout the curriculum is to avoid being conceited and boastful.

In a lesson on sharing (third year), Sumandak cannot complete her work because she has no colored pencils; her father can't afford them. Premila and Aspanisa tell her not to be ashamed to borrow; everyone is supposed to share. Premila offers to give Sumandak a set of pencils since her father brought her a new set from Japan." Aspa exclaims, "You didn't tell us your father went to Japan! "and Prem answers, "So what, it was just a business trip. " The underlying message is clear. Poor and rich children should share without calling excess attention to their different circumstances, an issue that becomes increasingly important with rapid economic development.

Finally, early moral development researchers such as Piaget and Kohlberg would probably be comfortable with the predominance of males in this curriculum. Boys are more often the main characters in the stories, and stories featuring girls are frequently about chores at home, while boys are featured in stories about the outside world and adventurous situations. Table 1 shows the percentages of boys and girls shown in pictures illustrating the main story line of each lesson.

Table 1

Percentage of Children Pictured in Main Story of Each Lesson

	Boys	Girls
Book 1	68	32
Book 2	74	26
Book 3	61	39
Book 4	73	27
Book 5	67	33

Table 2 shows the percentages of stories in which both boys and girls, boys only, girls only or no children, appear as characters.

Table 2

Gender Distribution by Stories (Percentages)

	Boys and girls	Boys only	Girls only	No children
Book 1	51	47	2	0
Book 2	28	33	8	30
Book 3	28	40	15	18
Book 4	27	39	12	21
Book 5	6	9	5	39

This curriculum does not openly advocate different kinds of rules or responsibilities for girls and boys (for example, boys are shown helping with housework, though girls are shown doing this more), but the emphasis on pictures of and stories about boys may leave girls feeling less included.

This moral education curriculum is in an experimental stage. The context in which it is taught, the openness of classroom discussions and the ways these lessons are or are not applied in other parts of the curriculum and in the schools' structure of authority, can be expected to influence the ways these values are learned and the extent to which they affect children's moral development in Malaysia.

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